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## The Subaltern Can Speak: Voices of Poets in Divided Korea

Ailee Cho

Spivak asks, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and answers in the negative. The same question can be asked of South Korea following its liberation from Japanese colonial rule. But the answer is in the positive. Subaltern's voices can be heard in the poems on the division of Korea. Here, divided Korea is compared to a severed human body in deep pain as if an actual human body had been severed. It is also represented as an unnatural state that will end in apocalyptic vision. When readers return to the origin of the national division and empathize with the body in pain, this voice still remains alive.

### Introduction

In an essay of the same title, Gayatri Spivak famously asked, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" before answering in the negative. According to Spivak, the subaltern is only a subject effect or a trace found in the historical records of colonial rulers. Using the example of the isolated Hindu practice of "sati," wherein a widowed woman voluntarily burns herself on her husband's funeral pyre, Spivak argues that the British understood women in sati to be the victims of inhumane torture, while the native elite of India saw those women as embodying purity, strength, and love. Significantly, the only two voices to be heard regarding sati are those of the ruling classes; the voices of women, who are subalterns, are never heard. Spivak's question can be applied to South Korea following its liberation from Japanese colonial rule. Though Korea was "liberated," it remained an object to be almost arbitrarily divided and ruled by the terms of a series of conferences between the United States and the Soviet Union. Korea was no longer an independent nation, nor even a colony, but a pawn in the ongoing conflict of the Cold War. In this discourse, the voices of the United States and the U.S.S.R. were clearly heard. The voice of a native elite, President Syngman Rhee was also heard, in his report to the United States Department of Defense (DOD). But can we find the voice of the subaltern?

The division of Korea was not determined by Koreans themselves, but by powerful nations which were confused by what to do with the nation following its liberation from Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945). Having determined the disarmament of the Japanese military, the United States and the former Soviet Union decided on August 9, 1945, to divide Korea along the latitude of 38° N into

American and Soviet occupation zones. The initial decision to draw a line at the 38th parallel was wholly an American action (Cumings, p. 120), which was later approved by the Soviets. The opinion of Koreans played no part in either the decision to divide or the specifics of the division. As far as the United States and the Soviet Union were concerned, Korea had no capability for political independence and autonomy, and therefore needed to be occupied. In December of 1945, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union signed the Moscow Agreement, which fixed this 38th parallel. As Bruce Cumings has said, the Moscow Agreement declared a “four-year trusteeship of Korea for up to five years” and clearly revealed that the Soviets and the Americans were the two powers most principally concerned with Korea (Cumings, p. 217). Paternal tutelage was enacted under the control of the United States-Soviet Union Joint Commission.

The ruling elite of South Korea echoed the voices of the two superpowers and, moreover, sought to turn the national division into an established fact. Both the right wing, including Syngman Rhee, and the leftist elite supported the trusteeship of Korea following its division at the 38th parallel. In December of 1946, Rhee, who was later installed by the U.S. as the first President of South Korea, traveled to the United States to plead that the Americans “at least establish a government in South Korea, since it was clear that the Soviet Union would not consent to the establishment of a free government for the entire Korea” (Kim, p. 87). In the six categories addressed to the DOD, Rhee presented a specific action plan for the establishment of a government in South Korea, and actively promoted this to the American government and press. The ultimate goal of such promotion lay in establishing a South Korean government whose security would be guaranteed by the military power of the United States (Chöng, p. 312). The voice of the ruling elite supported a divided governance, and on May 10, 1948, a general election was held solely in South Korea, thus enacting what Rhee had dubbed a “desperately needed amputation” (Cumings, p. 214).

Rhee’s support for the division of Korea was mirrored within the leftist elite. On January 3, 1946, a leftist group which had hitherto opposed the trusteeship abruptly switched its stance and supported the Moscow Agreement (Cumings, p. 223). They endeavored to persuade the people by arguing that Korea could be independent only after accepting trusteeship and that the intention of the Moscow Agreement was to enact an interim stage before full independence. The demand for the immediate independence of Korea became a mere fantasy.



The writer Yi T'aejun stated,

"The Korean public must rid themselves of the fantastic view of independence that they harbored before August 15 [the day of the Japanese emperor's unconditional surrender to the Allies]. It will then be possible to understand the reason for supporting the Moscow Conference of [American, British, and Soviet] Foreign Ministers, and national unification will consequently be accomplished." (Im, p. 46)

It is possible to find the Korean people's voices in the anti-trusteeship movement, which emerged as a series of work stoppages and demonstrations. The majority of Koreans wanted immediate independence and an autonomous government, but this implied a unified Korea. However, due to the interests of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the ruling elite, the Korean Peninsula was divided into two Koreas. The subalterns opposed this division, and one of the ways they expressed their resistance was through poetry. The voices of poets effectively represented how the people felt about the division of Korea.

### **Korea as a Severed Human Body in Pain**

The subalterns' strongest and most basic response to the national division was pain. One poet expressed this pain by likening it to the wretched image of a human body cut in two:

O homeland, you are as pitiful as Shim Ch'öng,<sup>1</sup>  
The poet chokes up when he tries to call your name.

Those butchers of all centuries  
Seek to hack you to pieces like a fish on a chopping board,  
And yet why is heaven so indifferent?

O heaven, in the streets, the people, who can neither hope nor despair  
Daily lose their minds,  
Your enemies and allies who foster those enemies  
Seek once more to cut you in two,  
And yet are you but a reed that falls thinking?  
(Ku Sang, "Selected Poem from the Calamity 20")

To Ku Sang, the common enemy is neither the North nor the South, but the superpowers and the ruling elite who are compared to butchers, while Korea is a fish on a chopping board. To the dividing powers, the pain of the Korean people

is either nonexistent or at least irrelevant. Just as a butcher is insensitive to the pain of the animals to be slaughtered, the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union are insensitive to the pain of Koreans. From the poet's standpoint, however, the Korean Peninsula is not an insensitive fish, but "Shim Ch'öng" and a "reed that falls thinking," or an aggregate of humanity. The Korean Peninsula becomes a human body severed in two, and the main sentiments communicated by this are pain and sorrow. The poet is tangibly affected by this pain and pities the Korean Peninsula as he pities Shim Ch'öng. Ku Sang represents history on the part of the victim: he vividly depicts the perspective of the victims and criticizes the insensitivity of the powerful victors. Walter Benjamin wrote that "empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers" (p. 256). On the contrary, empathy with the victim leads one to reconsider the essence of the rule.

However, it is no simple personification to see the Korean Peninsula as a severed human body. This is because such an analogy overlaps with the horrific image of actual bodies in pain, which subalterns witnessed on countless occasions during the Korean War. Cho Chihun describes in detail the throes of a dying boy soldier in the People's Army whom he witnessed during the war:

The corpse of the boy, barely alive,  
Rotten are his limbs, soused in blackish red blood,  
And half-open eyes are already bleary, speechless.  
Pained and thirsty, you would have crawled here,  
Gulping down the water, with your forehead thrust in the waterside.

The mountains and rivers of the same homeland,  
The smell of earth in your home province must be so.

...

Like leaving a loved one,  
Inevitable heartbreak  
Still remains.

(Cho Chihun, "Here Lies Fallen a Soldier of the People's Army")

Chihun renders the enemy as one's beloved and a citizen of the "same homeland," which invokes the image of one's own self. Thus, the poem opposes the typical rhetoric of war, which depicts the enemy as an "other," and encourages each side "to increase its own immunity while inflicting damage on the other" (Scarry, p. 69). During wars, the enemy is no longer human and becomes a reified object that one must kill to preserve one's own life. However,



the Korean War was different because here the enemy could easily be seen as one's beloved. Karatani Kojin wrote that "we do not empathize with others because we are aware of [their] pain. Conversely, we are aware of [their] pain because we empathize with others" (pp. 246-247). Hence, according to Karatani, cognition is possible because of empathy. Although Cho Chihun's poem begins with empathy for an enemy, it is transformed into one for the beloved. The dead boy is one's beloved, one's brethren, and one's own self.

Many Koreans witnessed severed bodies and other gruesome sights during the Korean War. Thus, when the poet compares the divided homeland to a divided body, it does not simply designate the social body. General analogies of society to the body have been repeated since Plato, where the social body is an object of rule, as seen from the view of the rulers. In the poem, however, the body is one that recalls the vivid image of bodies in pain, as directly witnessed by those who experienced the war. Consequently, readers of these poems were apt to remember specific images of severed bodies in pain that they had witnessed during the Korean War,<sup>2</sup> and must have responded to this image with greater empathy.

### **The Remembered Past**

Despite the Korean Armistice Agreement, the national division does not represent a mere pause in a war with an enemy. The division caused subalterns to be consumed by feelings of immediate and personal sorrow. Such emotional immediacy is utterly different from either the hostility of anti-communist ideology or the feelings of South Koreans today, who see North Korea as a burdensome recipient of relief. Many South Koreans today adopt the American perspective and view the North as a member of the "axis of evil" or an object of pity. But the so-called "axis of evil" is neither a novel nor a recent concept. In fact, due to an anti-communist education, South Koreans have long viewed their Northern affiliates as goblins or monsters. However, the more dominant image of North Korea today is that of a land of poverty where rice and medicine are sent, a place which best remains unseen. In other words, North Korea is the repressed shadow of the bright South Korean society. It is an entity that one wishes to deny, but which continually reappears like a specter, creating a palpable anxiety. Consequently, many South Koreans view reunification as an onerous responsibility which must be fulfilled despite considerable inconvenience, and whose rationale must be discovered logically. However, South Korean poets

immediately after the national division exhibited quite different emotion towards the North Korea.

In Pak Chaesam's poem, the sorrow of the national division is heartbreakingly personal. Like the yearning for one's beloved, reunification never leaves the poet's mind. Indeed, reunification consumes Pak's entire being during each moment of his daily life until the community and the individual become one. The national division, a problem of the community, thus becomes the greatest sorrow of the individual:

Yesterday, the *sūran skirt* of my elder sister,  
Widowed during the Korean War,  
Lightly fluttered, hanging on the wall,  
So I said, "Ah! My homeland!"

Today, on desolate palace grounds,  
Yellow ginkgo leaves here and there  
Shake in the wisp of wind from the autumn sky,  
So I say, "Ah! My homeland!"  
(Pak Chaesam, "Love for the Homeland")

Regardless of whether the poet looks at his sister's skirt or takes a walk on the grounds of an old palace, the national division invokes his deepest personal sorrow. The sorrow which he feels at his sister's skirt in the first stanza is borne of the direct damage caused by the Korean War. In contrast, while walking through the grounds of the former palace, Pak feels a vivid sorrow for his homeland, but on an entirely personal level. In terms of time, the poem addresses a "total love for the homeland that encompasses both the past of yesterday and the present of today" (Kang, p. 61). Thus, today is the present and at the same time the past, since the perceptions of today are inseparable from the memory of the war and the national division. The movement of the ginkgo leaves, which shake the desolation, demand attention. As the present overlaps with the past in the shaking movement of the leaves, the calmness vanishes as it reminds the poet of a reality which includes the national division. The remembered past is full of the injustice of the national division. The poet does not attempt to deny the national division on a divine or transcendental dimension. Indeed, reunification is not a "postponed dream or ideal."<sup>3</sup> In the past thus remembered, the love for the homeland is thoroughly grounded in real life. The strength of this poem lies in its



recognition and acceptance of the reality of the national division, which captures a moment of real sorrow without considering it in a divine or transcendental level. By thus giving a voice to this remembered past, Pak enunciates the sorrow of the subalterns and thus transcends the dominant discourse.

To the ruling elite of the two Koreas, who see both North and South Korea as objects of rule, the national division is a “natural” state. To the subalterns, however, the national division is decidedly unnatural. In the following poem by Pak Chaesam, the national division is an unnatural state where “everything is blocked,” in contrast to nature, which is represented by freely flying birds. Underlying such a description is the desire to free oneself from an unnatural state and to move on to a natural one:

Now, the South and the North are  
 A pitch-dark cliff so that not only tidings but also  
 Everything is blocked,  
 And the more successful I am,  
 The more I am bound to be unmindful of my countrymen in the North,  
 But birds  
 Freely come and go, borderless,  
 And winds make a habit of blowing there and coming here.  
 (Pak Chaesam, “The Sorrow of the National Division”)

Using “But” as the boundary, Pak contrasts the natural state of winds and birds, which are unfettered by the national division, with the unnatural state caused by political ideology. Nature which is, here, a reunified Korea is above ideology. By stressing the ascendancy of nature, the poet shows that a severance caused by ideology is extremely precarious. The physical and social reality of the national division thus becomes the unnatural state which must be repaired.

### Apocalyptic Vision

Over time, the burden of the national division has accumulated for the subalterns. As the period of the national division is prolonged, the birds which fly over the barbed wire boundary between the two Koreas are replaced by a butterfly, which flies into the barbed wire and dies. “For the first time, the butterfly knew what a wall was and had to fly with wings wet with blood. The wind blows once again. Flying for a while, to be embraced by the warm and sad barbed wire of our land, yearning for this last flower bed, it was not yet dead” (Pak Pong’u, “The Butterfly and Barbed Wire”). Pak contrasts the solid barbed



wire of the national division with the frail wings of the butterfly. The poet's despair is apparent in the image of the barbed wire, which the butterfly cannot transcend.

However, the subalterns do not see the division as an immutable reality. They transform their hopeless state into an eschatological and revolutionary vision. Consequently, the homeland is no longer compared to Shim Ch'ŏng as a victim. Although the divided nation must be utterly destroyed, Pak Pong'u's vision in "The Armistice Line" is also revolutionary: such destruction is followed by the vision of a reunified Korea:

Mountain against mountain and faithless face against the other face opposite each other,  
Always in the darkness, knowing a thunderous volcano will erupt for once,  
Should it become a flower in such a pose?

That cold scene of mutual gaze.  
Is the beautiful land already without the spirit of Koguryŏ and the stories of Silla?  
Occupied by the stars, the heavens are but one to the last...  
Did the meaning of our faces, anxious for some reason, lie here?

All bloodshed has passed like a dream, and a square where, even now, a single tree cannot stand with a peaceful mind.  
Is it still a rest, with the vein cut? Are they stories that grow thin?

O odious wind, like a serpent's tongue, sure to blow for once,  
Are we to undergo once more the harsh wintering, which you, too, know already?  
Having blossomed sinless,  
How much longer must flowers live in their places now?  
Is this the only beautiful path?

Mountain and mountain opposite each other and faithless face and face opposite each other,  
Always in the darkness, knowing a thunderous volcano will erupt for once,  
Should it become a flower in such a pose?  
(Pak Pong'u, "The Armistice Line")

Although centering on phrases such as "faithless face against the other face" or "distrust, distrust brought about by opposing systems" (Kang, p. 34), this poem stresses the inevitability of reunification by beginning and ending with the conviction that a "thunderous volcano will erupt." As with other poets, Pak

Pong'u equates nature with a state unfettered by the national division, in the line "[o]ccupied by the stars, the heavens are but one to the last." This state of emancipation is contrasted with the unnatural state of "faithless face against the other face." The images, such as a "square where, even now, a single tree cannot stand with a peaceful mind" and a severed body "with the vein cut," elevate the unnatural state from mere physical destruction to absolute tragedy. Pak Pong'u's poem is particularly unique because he places this contrast with nature into a historical context. By adding a historical dimension, with allusions to the ancient Korean kingdoms of Silla and Koguryō in the second stanza, Pak transforms the national division and reunification into issues which must be recognized and resolved historically.

The resolution to this historical impasse is the "volcano," which erupts with "thundering" sounds. The moment of the volcano's eruption can be identified as Benjamin's *Jetzt-Zeit*, a moment at which the continuum of history explodes. In the words of Giorgio Agamben, "Against the empty, quantified instant, Benjamin sets 'a time of the now', *Jetzt-Zeit*, construed as a messianic cessation of happening" (1993, p. 112). The national division, which is akin to the "happening," is completely destroyed with a volcanic eruption. However, the annihilation also represents a moment of redemption. Such a messianic moment is similar to what Benjamin saw in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin wrote:

[H]is [angel's] face is turned toward the past....[H]e sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise....[T]he storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (pp. 257-258)

As with the scene before Benjamin's angel, at the moment of the volcanic eruption in "The Armistice Line," everything that has brought about the national division will be destroyed and become mere wreckage. However, the eruption does not stop at mere destruction. Remnants of the past will be scattered, giving way to inevitable progress. The necessity of progress, which Benjamin has termed a "storm blowing in from Paradise," is implied in this poem by Pak Pong'u, who defines progress as the push towards reunification.

The destruction caused by the volcanic eruption, or the destruction of the national division, will also bring about historical redemption. Giorgio Agamben



explains that “Historical redemption appears as inseparable from the capacity to tear the past from its context, destroying it, in order to return it, transfigured, to its origin” (1999, p. 152). Thus, the destruction of the Korean national division signifies return to the origin of the division. Agamben continues, saying that “[w]hat is saved is what never was, something new. This is the sense of the ‘transfiguration’ that takes place in the origin” (p. 158). Although the eruption results in a return to the origin of the national division, this return does not imply an acceptance of the past, but the emergence of a redeemed past, or a reunification. “For that day, / Roaring like the waves, / When the rusty rails will shine like silver, / When the doors will fling wide open” (Pak Pong’u, “Enlarged Special Edition Types on the Ground”). Pak’s “that day” is the day of reunification, which will occur when the past is redeemed. Historical redemption lies in returning to the origin to depict a state which might have happened, yet did not. Pak’s evocation of “that day, / Roaring like the waves” redeems the past by transforming the lost possibility of a unified Korea into an inevitable future. This is the voice of subalterns that the poet vividly transmits.

### **The Redemption of History**

At the present time, the national division not only seems to be fixed, but is also detached from the lives of individual Koreans. The need for a “literature of reunification that is not trapped within a divided world but presents free viewpoints from a unified standpoint”<sup>4</sup> is greater than ever before. The “free viewpoints” must not be the declaration of abstract concepts, but sensuous realizations of the necessity for reunification, like smelling roses from a typewriter.

Today, the pain and sorrow of the national division which was depicted so sensuously in the examined poetic works is sporadically repeated in media broadcasts of the temporary reunions of families separated from North and South Korea. The shock presented by the temporary reunions of these divided families recalls the dark remains which cannot be captured within the framework of the prosperous South Korean society. Seeing the overwhelming emotion of the reunited families raises the fundamental question: why must Korea remain in the unnatural state of the national division? The national division serves as a barrier preventing the reunion of blood kin, the most natural human instinct. Such an aberration cannot be justified for any “rational” reason, yet the unresolved

severance of blood ties caused by the national division continues to be endlessly repeated. The archetype of such repeated sensibilities is perhaps best expressed in Kim Kyudong's poem "A Letter from Mother in the North," where he expresses his sorrow through his mother's voice. This work takes the form of a speech by the poet's mother, whom he "parted from at 24," as heard in a dream in which he appeared as a 47-year-old wanderer. The mother's voice is the most basic voice of subalterns, and this archetype is repeated:

You only cried,  
 With your head buried in my lap,  
 Without even a word, you only cried, like a child,  
 Only cried, without restraint.  
 How have you come to grow so thin?  
 Having lived through, without dying, all those long, long days,  
 You really came to see me.  
 (Kim Kyudong, "A Letter from Mother in the North")

By returning to the origin of the national division and listening to the voices of poets who reveal such archetypes at that origin, we come to imagine what never happened in the past. Furthermore, the redemption of history lies in that very imagination.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The heroine of a traditional Korean folk tale and an only child, Shim Ch'öng is raised by her widowed father, Blind Man Shim. After being rescued from a ditch by a Buddhist monk, in order to regain his sight, Blind Man Shim promises to donate 300 sacks of rice to the local temple, despite his extreme poverty. Learning of this pledge, the devoted daughter sells herself to a group of passing Chinese merchant sailors who need a virgin to sacrifice to the Dragon King, the fabled ruler of the seas. Once thrown into the sea, Chöng is miraculously taken to the underwater king, who is moved by her filial piety and restores her to this life in a huge lotus blossom. The unearthly flower is presented to the emperor, who falls in love with and marries the girl. As the empress, she subsequently holds a feast for all blind men throughout the realm in the hope of finding her wandering father, who does indeed come to the palace. Upon hearing his daughter's voice, he opens his eyes in shock and realizes that he has regained his vision. Beloved for ages, the story has been told and retold in diverse media and genres, including *kut* (shamanistic rituals), classical novels, *p'ansori* (traditional story-singing), modern ballet, musicals, and animated films.

<sup>2</sup>According to generations who experienced the Korean War, the scene in the recent film directed by Kang Je-gyu, *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War*, where corpses are scattered about, is very similar to what they actually witnessed.



<sup>3</sup>In an interview with the daily *Hankyoreh* dated January 2, 2010, Cumings stated that the reunification of Korea had become a “postponed dream or ideal.” This is an appropriate interpretation of the current state. However, when one returns to the origin of the national division, the voices of contemporary subalterns saw reunification as neither a dream nor an ideal but as a personal task to be accomplished in this life.

<sup>4</sup>Pak, T. (1986), p. 44.

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